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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses a method for helping teachers create nonsexist classrooms. The method, a process approach, was developed in a research study which measured the effects of a nonsexist classroom environment on the sex role attitudes of first graders. The method is characterized by two phases: a preactive phase, in which the classroom environment and curriculum are modified to support a nonsexist perspective, and an interactive phase, in which stereotypical attitudes and behaviors among the students are systematically treated. Activities and materials involved in each phase are described, and data from the research study are briefly presented. (MP)

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CREATING NONSEXIST CLASSROOMS: A PROCESS APPROACH

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OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss a method for helping teachers create nonsexist classrooms. The method, a Process Approach, was developed in a research study which measured the effects of a nonsexist classroom on the sex role attitudes of first graders. Data from the research study will be briefly presented.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RATIONALE

According to social psychologists Brooks-Gunn and Matthews (1979), schools have a compelling influence on children's acquisition of sex-typed behaviors. Though the negative consequences of sex role socialization in the schools have been well documented (Dwerk, Davidson, Nelson, and Enna, 1978; Fagot and Patterson, 1969; Serbin, O'Leary, Kent and Tonick, 1973), few studies have previously measured the effects of a nonsexist classroom on the sex role attitudes of children. Flerx, Fidler, and Rogers (1976) found that when children were presented with egalitarian role models in books and films, their attitudes became less stereotypic. Guttentag and Bray (1976) and Koblinsky and Sugawara (1979) also found that children's sex role attitudes were effectively modified after exposure to a nonsexist curriculum. These studies support the social learning theory of sex role acquisition which postulates that the development of sex role knowledge is a function of the child's social learning history (Bandura and Walters,

1973).

Several resources are available to help teachers create nonsexist educational programs. Guttentag and Bray (1976) describe nonsexist curricular activities and provide background reading materials and resources for teachers. Non-Sexist Education for the Young Child, A Practical Guide (Sprung, 1975) suggests ways to create nonsexist environments, describes five early childhood programs, and includes a comprehensive list of nonstereotypic books and materials. Many of the suggestions in these and other resources focus on modifications in the classroom environment and in the curriculum. However, several sources (Guttentag and Bray, 1976; Sadker, Serbin, Greenberg, Wirey, and McNett, 1977) identify the teacher as the key variable in implementing successful nonsexist programs. Sadker et al. (1977) note that while nonsexist curriculum and instructional materials are essential:

> The teacher's behavior is probably the most critical factor in determining whether what happens in a classroom will encourage the development of flexibility and proper sex attitudes or the retention of old stereotyping practices (p. 8).

If the teacher's behavior is indeed critical, too little has been said about specific teacher techniques for eliminating sex bias from the classroom. Consequently, a major focus of the present study was to identify teacher behaviors that promote the development of nonstereotyped attitudes in children.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE METHOD

The method used in creating the nonsexist classroom for this study can best be described as a process approach developed in response to daily classroom experiences. The method is characterized by two phases: a pre-active phase, in which the classroom environment and curriculum were modified to support a nonsexist perspective; and an interactive phase, in which stereotypic attitudes and behaviors among the students were systematically treated. To give the reader a clear understanding of how this method evolved, I will describe its development first-hand, as it occurred in the experimental classroom.

As an initial step, the classroom environment was modified to encourage nonstereotyped behavior. The physical layout was rearranged by combining block and house areas to encourage boys and girls to play together using a variety of toys. The academic curriculum was critically examined to identify and eliminate any sexist overtones. In math, for example, word problems portraying boys and girls in sex-typed activities were revised to show children in a wider range of activities. In some cases, the curriculum was expanded to include special units of study designed to broaden children's perceptions of the roles and skills available to them. A new social studies unit, for example, was created to broaden children's awareness of careers and roles they may assume as adults.

In addition to enlarging the curriculum to include a nonsexist dimension, it was also important that I examine my own behavior that unintentionally reinforced stereotyped beliefs. Research has identified numerous ways teachers typically treat boys and girls differently. Teachers often do a task for a girl, for instance, but give boys eight times as much detailed instruction in how to solve problems for themselves (Serbin, 1977). The findings of these studies helped me to identify and eliminate my own biased treatment of students.

In organizing the classroom, I placed boys and girls together to give them opportunities to learn from one another and to form friendships. Seating arrangements, lining-up procedures, small group instruction, and games involving teams were all sexually integrated. Also, I consciously modeled a wider range of behaviors and was careful to speak a nonsexist language.

Several weeks into the study, it was surprising to discover that the children's attitudes had changed very little in response to the nonsexist environment. The subtle modifications I had made in the classroom were not enough to stimulate change in the children. Even when given a choice, the children continued to behave according to the stereotypes they had learned long before entering my classroom. To neutralize these deeply socialized patterns, it seemed necessary that I confront their sex stereotyped beliefs as assertively as I had confronted sexism in other

parts of the environment.

In the interactive phase my focus shifted, then, from the classroom enviroment to the children themselves. First, I observed the students and identified the ways they appeared to limit their behavior to conform to a sex role. I talked to the children about their behavior to discover the attitudes underlying their actions. Next, I challenged the students' thinking by introducing new, nonsexist values that supported the behaviors I wished to encourage. Finally, I designed activities that provided children with opportunities to experience the nonsexist behavior firsthand.

One of the most obvious problems was that boys and girls automatically segregated at play time and often expressed negative attitudes toward the opposite-sex group. Although I had organized the classroom so that girls and boys could interact more frequently, these subtle modifications in organizational patterns were not enough to change the often antagonistic behavior between them. Although they were compelled to interact more frequently, they continued to interact in the same hostile ways.

Story time has always been a natural focal point for exploring the complexities of the human experience and for establishing classroom values and codes of acceptable behavior. Story time, therefore, became a good vehicle for promoting the idea that boys and girls can play together.

Over a period of a week, stories of boys and girls approaching each other, playing together, and making friends were read and discussed (Hoban, 1969; Iwasaki, 1970; Udry, 1965). The children's reactions were predictable. Some were disgusted: "Yuk! Girls!/Boys!" Some were pleased to announce that they already had friends of the opposite sex, and others remained quiet and uncommitted. In the heated discussions that followed, many sexist taboos were revealed; girls and boys who played together were viewed as "tomboys," "sissies," or "in love."

As we explored these loaded words together, the unfairness of such labeling was emphasized. Children began to admit that it was possible for boys and girls to play together just because they liked each other. The stories and the talks helped to establish a new classroom value: boys and girls can be friends.

In spite of this supportive environment, the majority of the class did not magically cross the girl-boy line and begin socializing. Although the children seemed attracted to exploring new friendships, they were unwilling to risk being teased by their peers. If I could eliminate the threat of ridicule, I felt certain the girls and boys would enjoy playing together.

A New Friends Game was specifically designed for the purpose of bringing boys and girls together in a nonthreatening way. The object of the game was to make a

new friend while completing a task. Before playing, I asked each child privately to name children in the class they would like to have as new friends. Using this list of names, I matched children together and assigned them a task, such as playing checkers. Boys and girls who had named each other in the private interview were assigned to play the game together. Making it a compulsory, timed activity diverted the children's attention from the fact that they were interacting with new playmates. The first time the game was played, we assembled afterward and talked about the experience. One of the ideas reinforced in the discussion was that many boys and girls had played together and become friends.

We continued to play New Friends Game once a week. Before each game, the children were given an opportunity to revise their list of potential friends. Not only did boys and girls begin naming each other more frequently, but they began socializing outside the context of the game--sitting together at group meetings, lunch time, and work time. At the end of several weeks, all the children demonstrated awareness of the possibility of having friends of the opposite sex, and many had experienced it and valued it for themselves.

After the first problem had been treated, I identified another stereotyped behavior to focus upon. Many girls spent their free time in the classroom playing house. Although there is value in this type of imitative play, the

girls were missing important opportunities for physical exercise and participation in team activities. It seemed necessary to teach the girls that physical fitness and athletic ability are desirable characteristics for girls as well as boys.

Creating an awareness and appreciation for body fitness and strength began with a guest athlete who came to the classroom dressed in jogging clothes. She talked to the children about how muscles function and stressed the idea that it is important for everyone to keep physically fit. She led the class in several exercises and talked about the many ways we could work to develop strong bodies.

Physical fitness thus established as a new classroom value, I announced that I would spend part of play time actively participating outside. Here my role modeling behavior was used as an effective strategy. The girls in the room were quick to follow me out to the playground. We climbed on the jungle gym and played follow-the-leader. It wasn't long before we ran into the boys, who were vigorously playing soccer. When we asked if we could join their game, they were happy to let us play.

In a natural progression of events, the strategy aimed at making physical activity attractive to the girls had led to an ideal opportunity to involve both sexes in a team activity. The boys and girls were receptive to playing together because of the value that had been established in

New Friends Game. Once the children perceived cross-sex play as acceptable, they were increasingly receptive to other new experiences, and the process of change was facilitated.

Following the events that helped children develop an appreciation for physical fitness, some girls chose to play soccer and others returned to activities inside the room. After participating in the outdoor activities, however, their decision to play "house" was a conscious one chosen from a variety of options they had experienced firsthand.

As the nonsexist program expanded children's understanding of the roles available to them, it became necessary to confront the sexist ideas that constantly appeared in the environment (books, instructional materials, attitudes). When discussing sexism with the children, it was important to use terms that a six-year-old could easily understand. One of the most useful phrases for labeling sexist ideas was "old-fashioned"; for example, "People used to think that women could not be doctors. Now we know that's an old-fashioned idea."

Children's books often provided an excellent opportunity to apply our sharpened awareness because many of these books employ sexist concepts in both text and illustrations. Inconsistencies, errors, and "old-fashioned" ideas-- whether discovered by the children or pointed out by me-- stimulated many consciousness raising discussions. The

children enjoyed being detectives in search of outdated ideas: "Look! This book is old-fashioned. It says that nurses wear dresses" (obviously a half-truth, since a male and a female nurse had visited the classroom, and neither of them had been wearing a dress).

In a similar manner, nonsexist children's books were brought into the classroom to reinforce new ways of thinking. Books that offered children the widest range of choices were recognized and appreciated as valuable representations of the world as we now perceived it.

PROCESS MODEL FOR CHANGE

The process used in eliminating sex role stereotypes from the experimental classroom may serve as a model for other teachers working toward the same goal. As a result of the study, the following steps were identified:

1. Develop awareness. Teachers must develop their awareness of sexism as it exists within themselves, their classrooms, and the world around them.

2. Lay the foundation. Modify the environment to support a nonsexist perspective. Eliminate stereotyped influences from the curriculum and modify your own biased treatment of students.

3. Conceptualize the problem. Identify and examine sex stereotyped attitudes and behaviors among the students.

4. Treat the problem. Challenge students' thinking by introducing nonstereotyped attitudes. Establish new (nonsexist) classroom values. Provide students with opportunities to experience nonsexist behaviors.

5. Reinforce changes. Acknowledge and support changes as they occur. Expose any inconsistencies that appear in the classroom and modify them in support of new classroom values. Develop a vocabulary for discussing sexism with students.

DATA SOURCE

Data were collected in three first grade classrooms using the Sex Role Attitude Inventory (SRAI) as the pretest, posttest, and follow-up test. The Inventory has two parts, one which measures attitudes toward children and the other toward adults. The test was administered individually by trained testers. The experimental group, an open classroom, utilized the Process Approach in establishing a nonsexist environment for the seven-month intervention period. The two control groups, an open classroom and a traditionally organized classroom, were instructed to continue with the same curriculum that had been presented in the previous

year. A three-way multivariate analysis of covariance was used to examine the data. The dependent variables were sex role attitudes toward children and toward adults. The independent variables were treatment group, sex, and race.

When the independent variable of group was examined for the change in mean score on the SRAI, a significant difference was found between the experimental group and the two control groups. As a result of the intervention, students in the experimental group became less stereotypic in their sex role attitudes toward children and adults than did either control group.

For sex and race, no significant differences were found. Furthermore there were no significant interactions among the three independent variables of group, sex, and race. The intervention successfully and significantly modified the attitudes of students in the experimental group regardless of sex or race.

In the follow-up study, students who had participated in the experimental group and in one of the control groups were readministered the SRAI at the conclusion of the next school year. Follow-up test scores revealed that students who had been exposed to the nonsexist program remained significantly less stereotypic in their sex role attitudes than students who had been in the control group. The effects of the intervention endured one year after the program's completion. A monograph reporting the details of

the analysis is available from P.K. Yonge Laboratory School (see references).

CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study support the findings of previous studies (Guttentag and Bray, 1976; Flerx et al. 1976; Koblinsky and Sugawara, 1979) that children's sex role attitudes can be changed by environmental influences. This is consistent with the social learning theory of sex role development which hypothesizes that children's knowledge of sex roles is a function of their social learning history (Bandura and Walters, 1963). Results further indicate that, in this study, the Process Approach was an effective method of modifying children's sex role attitudes. The process model focuses the teacher on treating stereotypic behavior in students by confronting students about their attitudes, establishing new, non-sexist values, and providing opportunities to experience nonsexist behavior. As students repeatedly engage in a wide variety of activities that emphasize role flexibility, their attitudes about sex roles change.

The success of the intervention program seems largely dependent on the teacher's skill at perceiving sex stereotypes and actively confronting them. This requires that the teacher not only have a well developed understanding of sexism, but also a high level of commitment to bringing about the desired change. Guttentag and Bray

(1976) also found that the level of involvement on the part of the teacher was related to the effectiveness of the intervention: "Our data clearly indicate that the most powerful predictors of attitudinal change in students were the enthusiasm and convictions of the individual teacher" (p. 302).

Results from this study agree with the conclusions of Guttentag and Bray (1976) and Sadker et al. (1977) that the teacher plays a critical role in implementing a successful intervention. This suggests a need for teachers to develop the skill and sensitivity necessary to reduce sex role stereotyping in their classrooms. The Process Approach may be an effective training model for teacher education and inservice programs. Further research is necessary, however, to demonstrate the effectiveness of this model among teachers in a variety of settings.

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